Daily Press Briefing: Discussion on Afghanistan

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June 25, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Director, Press Office Daily Press Briefing, Selections on Afghanistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: The attack by the Taliban on the --

MR. VENTRELL: Yeah.

QUESTION: -- President's palace in Kabul. One, on the attack itself; and secondly, how do the U.S. sees the response by the Afghan National Security Forces in handling those attacks?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, it was a good response. Let me just say that the United States strongly condemns the attack today near the Presidential palace. We extend our deepest condolences to all Afghans affected by these senseless acts, and we commend the security forces which defeated them. So all the attackers were killed, demonstrating the futility of the Taliban's efforts to use violence and terror to achieve their aims. So – and even as we remain committed to supporting a peace process, we will not let our fight against international terrorism in Afghanistan or – let up, nor will we lessen our support to the Afghan forces. Our military and diplomatic efforts continue to be mutually reinforcing, and we reiterate our call on the Taliban to come to the table to talk to the Afghan Government about peace and reconciliation.

QUESTION: And has there been any further update on the peace talks between U.S. and the Taliban in Doha?

MR. VENTRELL: I don't have an update at this time, no.

QUESTION: And do you have any readout on Ambassador Dobbins's meetings in Pakistan?

MR. VENTRELL: Let me see if I have – I think the Embassy just put out a statement upon his arrival that details who he'll be meeting with. I know it was with a wide range of Pakistani leaders. And let me see if I had any additional information for you.

QUESTION: But do you think these --

MR. VENTRELL: No, I don't have any update other than he is in Islamabad, has had a wide range of discussions, principally reconciliation, but also, indeed, of course, economic and other areas in our broad bilateral relationship.

QUESTION: But does the U.S. believes that launching such attacks, Taliban show that it's not serious in these peace talks, and is basically delaying the peace process?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, again, we haven't seen yet that they're ready to have these talks. The onus is on them, and we're ready to have them. President Karzai has said that he recognizes the need for political reconciliation, but there is enormous mistrust. And so most insurgencies end with a political reconciliation, and we're continuing to have that — willing to have that dialogue, as are the Afghans. So we'll see what happens here.

June 24, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Director, Press Office Daily Press Briefing, Selections on Afghanistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: I wanted to ask about Special Representative Dobbins --

MR. VENTRELL: Sure.

QUESTION: -- who is in Kabul today --

MR. VENTRELL: He is.

QUESTION: -- and has been meeting with the Afghan authorities in Kabul.

MR. VENTRELL: He has been.

QUESTION: He's had a press conference, but I didn't actually see out of that whether he was asked or indeed said whether he's been able to set a date yet for the talks with the Taliban. Can you help us on that?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, he hasn't yet. I haven't seen the transcript of his press availability, but I was able to confirm that he did not meet with the Taliban. And currently, he has – anticipates onward stops in Islamabad, Pakistan, and New Delhi, India. But we don't have further details on potential stops beyond that at this time.

QUESTION: And so the idea is to hold the talks in Doha, right?

MR. VENTRELL: Right. That's where they would be. We still haven't set them. But as we've said, this is something we're – we are clear about how difficult this could be, but it's something that we're open to, and we hope that the Taliban will be prepared to do their part as well.

QUESTION: What's the main obstacle at the moment to setting a date?

MR. VENTRELL: I don't have anything particular one way or another to read out. I mean, this is something that you know there were – that in the opening of the office, in the early hours, there were some terms that weren't agreed to. Thanks to the efforts of the Qataris and others, there may still be an opportunity to move forward, so we need to see if we can get it back on track. We don't know whether that's possible or not.

QUESTION: Oh, really? So it might not happen at all now?

MR. VENTRELL: It might not. I mean, the Secretary said that over the weekend as well. We don't know one way or another. There were some hopeful signs, a couple steps forward, in terms of opening the office. Clearly, some issues that – some of the agreement that wasn't adhered to. But we want to see if we can get it back on track, but we'll be clear-eyed and continue to see what can happen.

QUESTION: What – so again, what's the stumbling block? What's the problem with getting it back on track now?

MR. VENTRELL: Again, I don't have any particular terms or conditions or other problems. We've said that if a meeting's possible, there'll be one, but I just don't have one to announce yet.

QUESTION: So the Taliban are actually not now acquiescing to a date for talks?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, again, we're ready to meet, so – to take a step back, though, remember, for us the goal is to get Afghans talking to Afghans. We said that we were open to meeting with the Taliban because we have issues to raise with them directly, but the principal goal is to get Afghans talking to Afghans. And so I think part of Ambassador Dobbins's trip was obviously working with the Afghans. And I think they've had some statements as well with the Afghanis over the weekend, where they made clear they are open to potentially having this way forward and a political dialogue, so --

QUESTION: So is the idea now to meet in a three-way situation then, with the U.S., Taliban, Afghans?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, we said we're willing to be there if they want us to be there, but we have to see what happens. The goal is to get the two sides talking together.

QUESTION: But it – I mean, this time last week it was going to be the U.S. and Taliban who were going to meet. Then we all know what happened with the office. Now --

MR. VENTRELL: Right. And so we're still open to having that meeting, which hasn't happened. Separately and apart from that, we think it's important to get the Afghans talking to the Afghans directly. If the High Peace Council and the Government of Afghanistan wants us to play a part in that, we're willing to play a part in that. But if not, they can have the talks directly amongst themselves.

QUESTION: So are you willing to step back now to allow the Afghan-to-Afghan talks to happen first, which was one of the requests from Karzai, of course?

MR. VENTRELL: They certainly could happen first, if that's able to happen. It's not clear whether that will transpire or not.

June 21, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Director, Press Office Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: On the talks with the Taliban, can you update on us on where Ambassador Dobbins is, what his plans are?

MR. VENTRELL: Ambassador Dobbins is en route to Doha, where he will join the Secretary and meet with Qatari officials. I don't have any other meetings to announce at this time for Ambassador Dobbins, but he is en route. This is commercial travel separately from the Secretary's plane, but he'll arrive in Doha as well and join the Secretary's party.

QUESTION: So there's no indication at this point, any plan to actually sit down with the Taliban?

MR. VENTRELL: Again, I don't have a specific meeting to announce. He's going to join the Secretary's bilateral meeting with the Qatari officials, and that's part of our bilateral agenda, reconciliation as well. But in terms of direct meetings with the Taliban, I don't have anything to announce at this time. We said that this is something potentially in the next few days.

One other thing – and there had been some incorrect reporting on this – just to say again from this podium that it's not the Secretary who will be meeting with the Taliban; that would be at Ambassador Dobbins's level or on his team, so – there had been some confusion about that in the press. The Secretary is going to meet with his counterparts and have a bilateral visit as well as the London 11 Syria meeting.

QUESTION: And what is the latest from President Karzai? Are they going to be joining talks? Are they willing to have talks? Have you been speaking with them about that?

MR. VENTRELL: I'm not sure if I've seen a statement overnight from the Afghan Government, but we've been clear all along. Our position has been that we want to get Afghans talking to Afghans. That's what the point of this reconciliation is and what we're working toward. We separately have some issues to discuss with the Taliban, principally among them Sergeant Bergdahl. And our hearts go out to his family. We continue to think that he needs to come home as soon as possible. Also, them breaking ties with terrorism, because obviously you know where this goes back to and the attacks on our country and where our interest in all of this started.

But in terms of reconciliation and Afghans talking to Afghans, that's really what the point of this political office is in Doha, and we want to get that on track. You know that the President –

President Obama and President Karzai committed to the process of working toward reconciliation when – back in January. So that's something that both of our countries think is important. But I haven't seen any announcements one way or another overnight.

QUESTION: Do you have any indication where Sergeant Bergdahl is actually being held at the moment?

MR. VENTRELL: I don't have any information one way or another on his whereabouts, but just to reaffirm that we've been clear about this, going back quite some time, that we're doing everything in our – military, diplomatically, with our intelligence community to bring him home. So certainly, his safety and well-being is a priority for the United States Government, and we'll continue to work toward that. One channel of potential activity is the diplomatic channel and discussing this directly with the Taliban.

June 20, 2013

Jen Psaki, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan (Taliban/Qatar)
Washington, DC

QUESTION: Can you – you spoke a little bit on Tuesday and then again on Wednesday about Sergeant Bergdahl and the Taliban's desire for their prisoners to be released. Can you – is there anything new to say on that, or is it the position that you expressed, that you evinced on Tuesday and Wednesday, still the Administration's position?

MS. PSAKI: The same position. Let me just repeat. I know this has been a question of a couple of people, so bear with me here. So to be clear, as we have all discussed over the past couple of days, President Karzai and President Obama jointly called on the Government of Qatar to facilitate an office in Doha for the purpose of negotiations between the Afghan High Peace Council and the authorized representatives of the Taliban. That has been the purpose, as we've talked about, and there are a broad range of issues that the United States will raise in our own discussions.

So the main dialogue we want to support is among the Afghans. However, there are some issues, of course, we'll discuss. We'll talk with the Taliban, as I mentioned over the past couple of days, about the safe return of Sergeant Bergdahl. He has been gone far too long. We continue to call for and work towards his safe and immediate release. This is an issue, the exchange of detainees, that the Taliban has raised in the past. And we certainly expect that they will raise it, as they have publicly, as a part of these discussions. But as they have not yet commenced, we'll wait for them to commence.

QUESTION: Right. But are you open to this idea? Or are you open to discussing it?

MS. PSAKI: We're open to discussing this issue as part of the negotiations, and we fully expect them to raise it.

QUESTION: But open to discussing a swap?

MS. PSAKI: I don't want to get --

QUESTION: Or just open to discussing the transfer of the prisoners separately from the release of Sergeant Bergdahl?

MS. PSAKI: Well, there's a couple different things here, which I think is why you're asking the question, of course. One, we've been very clear on our feelings about Sergeant Bergdahl and the need for him to be released. We have not made a decision to transfer any Taliban detainees from

Guantanamo Bay, though we anticipate, as I've said, that the Taliban will raise this issue. As we've long said, we'll make any such decisions in consultation with Congress and according to U.S. law. But they have stated before, as they've stated again today, that this is an issue – the release of these detainees – that they would plan to raise.

QUESTION: Right, but I guess what I'm getting at is that I just – it's not a nonstarter for the Administration, this idea, the swap idea?

MS. PSAKI: Well --

QUESTION: Or is it a nonstarter?

MS. PSAKI: Again, it's hard to answer that question because the negotiations haven't started, but we expect them to raise it, anticipate it being a part of the discussions. Beyond that, I just don't have anything else to add to it.

QUESTION: Just for clarity --

QUESTION: Can you clarify something on --

QUESTION: Just for clarity, in order for a release of Guantanamo detainees to happen, that has to be signed off by the Secretary of Defense, correct?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I'd – there's obviously an interagency process and in coordination and cooperation with Congress. I don't have every specific piece of that in here, but you're correct that there are every – there are several components of it.

QUESTION: I just wanted a clarification on the Taliban in custody in the field, those who are taken in battle. Are they considered prisoners of war by the United States of America? What is their classification?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, I think that they're referring to – and I've seen different numbers.

QUESTION: I understand.

MS. PSAKI: I don't want to speak on their behalf – let me just finish – but there have been different numbers that have put – been put out there about the number of detainees. Beyond that, I would point you to them and who they're referring to.

QUESTION: I'm not talking about numbers. I'm not talking about the ones in Guantanamo. But I'm saying, as a matter of policy, does the United States consider the Taliban captured in battle – are they prisoners of war?

MS. PSAKI: I think that's a pretty broad question, so --

QUESTION: It's not a broad question. Are they prisoners of war or are they like terrorists, for instance?

MS. PSAKI: I just don't have anything for you on that, Said.

QUESTION: Can I check, since we're talking about the Taliban talks, have you any update for us on travel for Special Representative Dobbins?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have any update on – as you know, and I know as has been reported, we anticipate these talks happening in the coming days. I don't have anything specific beyond that. As I said yesterday, he is packed and ready to go with his passport and suitcase, and I anticipate he will when it's time for those talks.

QUESTION: So could you explain what the holdup is now still to organizing these talks?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we're working, as I mentioned yesterday, in close coordination with the High Peace Council, and we're working to schedule them. I wouldn't characterize it as a delay as much as working out, around the Secretary's trip and around some other kind of logistical components, when we can make it happen.

QUESTION: As far as this Taliban office is concerned in Qatar, how does President Karzai feel? So, is he happy from the talks with the U.S. officials or with the – I mean, I would imagine with the President because you'll say talk to the White House – but as far as this building or Secretary is concerned, is he happy or was this his consent --

MS. PSAKI: Is the Secretary happy, or is President Karzai happy?

QUESTION: No, President Karzai.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I don't speak on his behalf. He did issue a statement today, which I would point all of you to. And I think that speaks for itself.

QUESTION: Can I just ask, in the answer to the last – to the question before, which was about Dobbins' travel, you said something about it revolving around the Secretary's trip. Can you explain why Ambassador Dobbins's travel would be contingent upon the Secretary's travel?

MS. PSAKI: Well, obviously the Secretary, as you all know, will be in Doha on Friday. I expect – he does not have any meetings, so let me just reconfirm that, with the Taliban.

QUESTION: Right.

MS. PSAKI: But the Ambassador will be working – we're working to schedule his meetings kind of around when it makes sense in the coming days.

QUESTION: Okay. So is – are you hinting that Ambassador Dobbins might go with the Secretary to Doha?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we're still working that out, but it certainly wouldn't be a surprise, given this issue could be on the agenda as part of our bilateral discussions.

QUESTION: Has there been any more contact since the two phone calls the other day between the Secretary and President Karzai?

MS. PSAKI: I don't believe so. I'd have to double check that I didn't miss anything in the last couple of hours, but I don't believe since yesterday.

QUESTION: So you're still waiting for President Karzai to make a decision whether to go back to the security talks then?

MS. PSAKI: Well, he made a public statement that he put out, which I think speaks for itself, but I would point you to that and our – the fact that we are working to plan when the Ambassador will be going overseas and when we can proceed with the talks.

QUESTION: And are there some U.S. officials in Kabul today? We are reporting out of Kabul that there are rumors that there are U.S. officials planned to visit Kabul today or --

MS. PSAKI: I mean, there are always U.S. officials there, as you know. So I'm not sure --

QUESTION: But around this issue? But around this issue with the security talks and the Taliban snafu and --

MS. PSAKI: I'm not sure who that would be referring to. I'm happy to check into it with our team. As you know, the Ambassador would be the one who's playing a leading role here, and I've kind of outlined where he is at this point.

QUESTION: Madam, as far as Secretary's trip is concerned, just quickly, yesterday Assistant Secretary Blake was speaking at CSIS and he said that, like you said, that he's ready to go, his passport is ready, and also, of course, I'm sure a visa for India. What he said as far as --

MS. PSAKI: Well, he's going with us, so that's good. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: As far as – yes, ma'am. As far as India trip, he said that there is so much to discuss between Indian officials and the Indian Government and U.S. officials and the Secretary. What I'm asking you: What is the major agenda, his whole – of his – I mean, this trip right now in India?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I expect the trip and the conversation to be wide-ranging. As you touched on, there are a number of issues that we work on bilaterally with India, whether it's our economic

relationship or issues like climate change and energy, or even security and counterterrorism issues. So I expect this will have a broad-ranging scope. As you know, the Secretary will also be giving a speech while he's there and he will be meeting with a range of officials, and he is really looking forward to it.

QUESTION: Including trafficking in persons, like to the – I mean, yesterday he was talking about it, because major TIP, or trafficking in persons, are from South Asia, from China or from India, Bangladesh and all that, in the name of better life in the U.S. or in the Middle East and better jobs and all that, because they are being misused – used and also exploitation, all these young girls.

MS. PSAKI: Well, Goyal, that's exactly why we put out the report yesterday and did an extensive briefing on it, covering all of those issues. So I would point you to that.

QUESTION: Yeah. Thank you. Given that the U.S. has said it wants to discuss Sergeant Bergdahl's release and the Taliban have indicated they want to talk about their commanders in Guantanamo, would – early on in the talks, could that be a make-and-break of the talks? I mean –

MS. PSAKI: Well, let me go back to what I said yesterday, and I think the day before, which is that the U.S. has a range of interests that we want to discuss with the Taliban, including the importance of the Taliban renouncing terrorism and violence, and certainly the issue of Sergeant Bergdahl and the fact that he has been gone too long will be a part of the discussion. And as I mentioned, we anticipate that the Taliban will also bring up, as they stated publicly, their own issues with detainees. But I don't want to get ahead of where we are in the process, given we're planning the talks and we're looking forward to that, but they haven't commenced quite yet.

QUESTION: And we got reports out of Qatar this morning that the talks would probably take place after Secretary Kerry leaves, probably Monday. Can you confirm that?

MS. PSAKI: We don't have a confirmed time, but again, in the coming days, and we're keeping some options open for his travel and what time works on both sides.

QUESTION: Jen, yesterday we were talking to an official who said that the Taliban are not a foreign terrorist organization; they are a specially designated global terrorist entity. Could you just – I know there's plenty on the website, but it's a little dense. Would you be able to just give us the high points, what is the difference between those?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I'd probably have to get you a kind of technical written readout of the differences between them, but to just reiterate what you said, the Taliban are a specially designated global terrorist entity. They have not been designated as a foreign terrorist organization. Beyond that, I can see if we can get something a little simpler to lay out for you the contrast between the two.

QUESTION: Has there been any phone calls with President Karzai in the last 24 hours?

MS. PSAKI: With President Karzai?

QUESTION: Yeah.

MS. PSAKI: Well, there was the one yesterday afternoon. I'd have to double-check if there was anything this morning that I wasn't aware of before I came down.

QUESTION: So there were three phone calls from Secretary to the President?

MS. PSAKI: There were two. There was one Tuesday night, and there was one Wednesday right before I came down to the briefing.

QUESTION: And the kind of statement, the first statement which Taliban issued from Doha after opening their office, and the reaction from the Afghan President – do you believe the Taliban has broken the promise of the kind of statement they issued and tried to derail the peace process itself from the very beginning?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we talked about this pretty extensively yesterday, so let me just give maybe a redux version of that, which is that we were disappointed by how the office was opened. The Secretary was in close touch, as you just mentioned, with President Karzai and with other officials about this. There were steps that were taken, including taking down the banner and the sign yesterday, that were positive steps. And we remain focused on moving towards negotiations because we feel it's the best path to a political solution and a political reconciliation here.

QUESTION: Are you aware that Qatar may have given the personnel, the Taliban personnel that are manning the office, diplomatic status?

MS. PSAKI: I am not. Our statement and what was required about the --

QUESTION: No, no. Not – no. (Inaudible.)

MS. PSAKI: -- rollout was – has been very clear, and the Qataris also took steps to help make the changes happen yesterday, but I would point you to that government for questions about that.

QUESTION: Do you have any specific reaction to the Taliban saying that they are willing to release Bergdahl? Is that something that the Administration believes is --

MS. PSAKI: I don't want to speculate on whether we believe it or not. Obviously, it's a priority for us. And I believe in the same statement, they said that they want some of their detainees as well. So we knew they would raise this issue. We expected them to. We're happy to discuss it. But again, there are a number of items on the agenda, and I just don't want to get ahead of the process before we begin the discussions.

QUESTION: Can you tell us if Cliff Sloan has had any – even though he's just the brand new envoy --

MS. PSAKI: He's starting July 1st, so he'd be very hardworking at home if he had made any decisions quite yet.

QUESTION: Jen, you said that you are ready to discuss this release issue. Who will be responsible for the legal process? Because I talked to one of the lawyers of the detainees that they want to release Mullah Hairullah and the lawyer told me yesterday that the U.S. – one of the U.S. courts in Washington rejected his demand last December. So U.S. courts are responsible for this process. How you will discuss this --

MS. PSAKI: Are you referring to detainees in Guantanamo?

QUESTION: Yes.

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think I covered that in terms of the fact that it's an interagency process. As Dana mentioned, there's a DOD component. There are several components here. But we also work closely with Congress in coordinating these decisions as well. So in terms of the legal components, of course that's a part of it. But I don't have anything specific to lay out for you.

QUESTION: It's up to the decision of courts, right, at the end of the day?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, it's a process that we work through with Congress and others. The laws around this certainly are – well, they're part of the process, but beyond that it's – I don't want to get ahead of where we are. This is just something that we expect to be discussed, not something that is in the process of being decided.

QUESTION: So Congress can prepare a deal to ease --

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, we consult with Congress. I'm not going to get ahead of where are in the process.

QUESTION: Jen --

MS. PSAKI: Go ahead, Deb.

QUESTION: Real quick on that point, I think the DOD has to notify Congress that they might want to release one of these guys or more of these guys. Has that notification process started?

MS. PSAKI: Again, we're in a preliminary stage, where the discussions have not even started. So there's not any decision that has been made. This has not even yet even been discussed. So there certainly wouldn't be a process underway at this stage.

QUESTION: So where are these Talibans are going to take the detainees from Guantanamo Bay? Where are they going to take them?

MS. PSAKI: Well, that's about 12 steps past where we are in the process. So we've gone – we've been eight steps past, but you took it a few more steps.

June 19, 2013

Jen Psaki, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan
Washington, DC

MS. PSAKI: Hello, everyone. All right. Well, before we get started, I just had one readout that I wanted to do at the top. The Secretary spoke with President Karzai last night and again this morning. Just to reiterate, in January, President Karzai and President Obama jointly called on the Government of Qatar to facilitate an office in Doha for the purposes of negotiations between the Afghan High Peace Council and the authorized representatives of the Taliban. The U.S. supports, as you all know, the opening of the political office of the Afghan Taliban for this purpose.

The Secretary reiterated the fact that we do not recognize the name Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. We note – he noted that the Government of Qatar has taken steps today to ensure that the political office is in compliance with the conditions established by the Government of Qatar for its operations, and noted also that we are pleased that the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued a statement clarifying that the name of the office is the Political Office of the Afghan Taliban and not the Political Office of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and has had the sign with the incorrect name in front of the door taken down. The office must not be treated as or represent itself as an embassy or other office representing the Afghan Taliban as an emirate government or sovereign.

With that, let's move to what's on your minds. What I did at the top was I read out – the Secretary spoke with President Karzai last night and again early this afternoon.

QUESTION: So I see you saying the sign's been taken down now. What response do you have to President Karzai's statement that he's suspending the U.S. bilateral security agreement talks as a result of this?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Jo, as you know, we've seen the palace statement, of course. And as President Obama and President Karzai affirmed in January, an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process is the surest way to end violence and assure – ensure lasting stability in Afghanistan and the region. The U.S. supports, of course, a peaceful, democratic, and unified Afghanistan. We remain committed to peace and reconciliation, and remain prepared to negotiate with Afghanistan to conclude a BSA that supports our shared objectives.

So we remain committed to the process. And again, there – the update I provided at the front end were several conversations he had with President Karzai, and we continue to work to coordinate and work with Afghanistan on all of these issues.

QUESTION: But despite those conversations, do the talks remain suspended by the Afghan Government or --

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would refer you to the Afghan Government. They put out the statement, of course, saying they were suspended. But we remain committed to continuing these negotiations and open to discussing, and are hopeful that we will be able to do that.

QUESTION: So how do you respond to criticism from people who are longtime observers of the situation in Afghanistan that the whole rollout of this very important announcement that the talks were going to start between the U.S. and Taliban has been mishandled the State Department and this Administration, because it just immediately got President Karzai's back up?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Jo, I would point you to what the President said this morning, or this afternoon, in Germany, which is that we always knew that there would be bumps in the road. This is a case where there have been decades of strife. They're – are at war and continue to be at war. Clearly, this is challenging. But diplomacy is hard, and we are – remain focused on it. Obviously, as evidence of that is the – are the Secretary's calls, the statements the President has made, and our continued commitment to moving towards a political reconciliation.

QUESTION: So you do accept, though, that their having a sign, the Taliban having a press conference with a sign saying the Islamic Government of the Emirates of Afghanistan or whatever it was, it was inappropriate?

MS. PSAKI: Yes, we do.

QUESTION: Didn't anybody know that that the flag issue and the naming of the office was going to tick him off? I mean, he said that long ago, so --

MS. PSAKI: Well, certainly that was not what was agreed to. And that's --

QUESTION: Was it a surprise on the part of the Taliban or the Government of Qatar?

MS. PSAKI: Was it a surprise to --

QUESTION: The U.S. that they did it this way.

MS. PSAKI: Well, it certainly wasn't what the agreed-to proposal was here. And as I stated at the top, the Qataris have taken steps which the Secretary and others are pleased by.

QUESTION: Jen, so – also, Jen, there's another thing that they're angry about, or I would say Karzai is angry about, which is that they would say that they are taking the back seat to the United States. After all, as we discussed yesterday, the United States is the first country that's going to be talking with the Taliban, not the Afghans. So there's another obvious problem. I mean, what do you say to that backseat comment, number one?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, I would point to comments we've made for months and months about how these negotiations and discussions need to be Afghan-led and Afghans talking to Afghans.

And we certainly anticipate that that will be the case. The U.S., as I mentioned yesterday, certainly has stakes here and we certainly have stakes that we will be conveying, as I mentioned yesterday, as a part of our own discussions. But this is ultimately up to the Afghan people, I should say Afghans of all sides, talking to one another, and that's consistently been our position and our belief.

QUESTION: Yes, correct. But I mean, just again we're into the rollout and the symbolism, and if the first meeting is going to be the United States with the Taliban, you'd have to say, "Why didn't you take a pass and say no, please, go ahead? Why don't you talk?"

MS. PSAKI: Well, we're continuing to coordinate with the Afghan Government and the High Peace Council on the next steps. I know there have been lots of reports out there about various meetings that have been scheduled or not scheduled, but what I can tell you is that we're coordinating closely with them, and our goal, of course, is to play a positive role in moving towards a political reconciliation here.

QUESTION: So does the U.S. then meet with them, as we expect, on Thursday?

MS. PSAKI: We never confirmed that was a meeting from here. And so, again, we are continuing to work with the Afghan Government and with the High Peace Council to determine next steps.

QUESTION: So you never confirmed it, as we know, from yesterday, but can you say right now what is the status? I mean, will there be talks? What is going to happen?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I don't have an update for you. And as we do, I'm sure we'll talk about this in the days ahead as well. So we're continuing to coordinate. That's where we are right now.

QUESTION: This seems to have risen out of background briefings from senior Administration officials. I mean, is this an appropriate way to announce a huge milestone in a 12-year war? I mean, it seems to have resulted in an awful lot of confusion and possibly the breaker of these talks. What will happen?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I'm not sure specifically what you're referring to, but the President has spoken to this. We talked significantly about this yesterday. The Secretary spoke to this briefly yesterday. So I would hardly say this was a rollout solely with a background briefing. Often we do that, as you know, to explain a process or provide additional details that would be helpful to all of you in your reporting.

QUESTION: Yeah. Could you clarify something for us? Now, the talks are still taking place tomorrow, correct?

MS. PSAKI: So what I just said was we're in close coordination with the Afghan Government and their High Peace Council on the next steps. At the top, as you know – and I think you were here for this – I outlined the two calls that the Secretary did last night and today with President Karzai, and some of the steps that have been taken over the course of the last 24 hours.

QUESTION: Okay, and that's exactly the point. I mean, Karzai seems to be – to remain displeased with your announcement about the talks. And the Taliban have taken action, actually, that are intended to scuttle these talks before they begin. So when you say Afghan-led and Afghan-owned and all these things, which Afghan and Afghan are you talking about?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think you know, the Afghans. But let me just reiterate something I said, which is – and which is pointing to what the President has said and what – today, which is that this is going to be a difficult process. We never thought it wouldn't be. Let's not forget that the context here is that the parties have been fighting for a very long time. They continue to fight even now. And we don't expect this process to be easy, but there have been a number of public statements, not just from the President but from military leaders and others, about how moving towards a political process and political reconciliation is the best path forward. So we will remain focused on it.

QUESTION: So you think that the Taliban taking credit for killing American soldiers in the last 24 hours, that does not in any way scuttle the talks?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, we didn't expect that they would decry al-Qaida and decry terrorism immediately off the top. This was – this is an end result, or an end goal, I should say. It's a bumpy road. We always knew it would be. And – but we're focused on moving forward because we know political process is the best path forward.

QUESTION: Jen, the – publicly denouncing or breaking ties with al-Qaida used to be a precondition for talks going ahead. Since when it has become an end goal?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I --

QUESTION: And does this not feed into the perception that the United States is ready to make any kind of concessions, because actually, it's just getting ready to cut and run from Afghanistan?

MS. PSAKI: Well, our goals, or our end goals here have been very consistent in breaking ties with al-Qaida, ending violence, and accepting the Afghan constitution. I referenced yesterday the statement that was issued. That was a positive step. This is a first step. We're still working towards the first step. And we know the first step is difficult. It's hard to take, often, to kick these things off. But again, I think there's broad agreement from President Karzai, who said this long before the U.S., has supported this, that the political reconciliation and the political process is the best path forward. But we know it's not going to be easy.

QUESTION: Madam, (1) you are recognizing Talibans as a political party or is going to be leading in the future maybe some kind of a political – I mean more than a political office? And (2) Talibans are coming from Pakistan and Afghanistan. Which Talibans we are talking about? And finally, are you also in touch with the Pakistan Government? Because they are the one who will be playing major role in this process (inaudible) peace in Afghanistan?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I mentioned yesterday how we were pleased with the support by the Government of Pakistan, but it's up to Afghan – the Afghans to determine next steps forward. In terms of what role they'll play, this is the whole point with the naming of the office, that this is a political office for the purpose of moving forward on a political reconciliation.

QUESTION: Is this going to be just a political office or some kind of consulate or embassy in the future for Taliban?

MS. PSAKI: Well, that – I would point you back to the statement I made in the beginning about what the purpose of the office is and what the Secretary reiterated on his phone calls.

QUESTION: And finally one more, quickly. Are you also in touch – because this is very major steps that the U.S. or international community has taken, and I understand that you have spoken with President Karzai, and he must be agreeing what you are talking about – are you all staying in touch with the Indian Government? Because they are also playing a major role there in the reconstruction of Afghanistan and this will affect the entire region.

MS. PSAKI: Well, we're in regular contact with the Government of India. As you know, because we just announced it, we are – the Secretary will be traveling to India next week, and I'm sure there'll be a range of topics that will be discussed as part of that visit.

QUESTION: Just on our wire is two Afghan officials saying that the U.S. has given Afghanistan written assurance that the new Taliban office in Qatar does not constitute political recognition. Do you – can you confirm that this was a written assurance?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not sure what the written assurance would be in reference to, although I believe I just stated that in terms of what was discussed on the call with President Karzai.

QUESTION: Oh, I'm sorry. I missed the top, so --

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm. Oh, no, I just – at the top, I read out the fact the Secretary had spoken with President Karzai both early this afternoon and last night, and that was part of the discussion.

QUESTION: Can you – I mean, look. Apparently the conversation last night didn't go very well, did it? I mean, because it was after that phone call that Karzai announced that he was breaking off the bilateral security talks, correct?

MS. PSAKI: Well --

QUESTION: Was there some confusion from the first phone call?

MS. PSAKI: I don't think there was any confusion, but again, this is a fluid process, Matt.

QUESTION: So – okay. Fair enough, then so what was the second --

MS. PSAKI: And so it's not irregular for them to be talking regularly.

QUESTION: Well, would you describe the first conversation as cordial or friendly?

MS. PSAKI: I would describe it as the Secretary reiterating what our positions are, which are consistent with what he has said to President Karzai in the past.

QUESTION: Well, then why did he – but then he felt the need to call back again. So what, he called him up and said, "Doh, Hamid, what the – what's going on here?" What – I mean, was there – (laughter) --

MS. PSAKI: I don't think you have a future as an actor. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: Was he surprised for – (laughter) – "Yo, Hamid, wtf?"

MS. PSAKI: I don't want to characterize whether he was surprised or what his feelings were, but there were developments, obviously, including the Qataris' involvement overnight. And so it's not at all abnormal. As you know, the Secretary believes in personal diplomacy and rolling up his sleeves and making phone calls, so not at all abnormal he would speak to him twice given the importance of this issue and importance of moving forward.

QUESTION: Well, let me put it this way: Was he or the Administration kind of taken aback by the position that President Karzai took earlier today?

MS. PSAKI: Well, let me first say that we were disappointed by the rollout on the ground, of course.

QUESTION: I understand that.

MS. PSAKI: And in terms of the position that he took, it was inconsistent with what we all believed the rollout would be. So I don't know that I'm going to characterize it further, but --

QUESTION: There were – well, but yesterday you talked about how you liked the rollout, you thought the rollout was good and that the Qataris had made everything clear. So clearly that didn't work out exactly the way it was planned. So it is fair to say, then, that you were kind of

taken aback because President Karzai – or maybe he didn't misunderstand, but it was – there was enough confusion there that he --

MS. PSAKI: Well, take --

QUESTION: You weren't expecting him yesterday to say, "You know what? I'm going to stop the negotiations on the bilateral security agreement," were you?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Matt, this is --

QUESTION: You didn't think he would be upset?

MS. PSAKI: "Taken aback" would be an overstatement. I don't think we went into any of this process here expecting that everything would be a smooth and sunny road.

QUESTION: All right. Fair enough.

MS. PSAKI: We knew it would be bumpy. This is an example of that.

QUESTION: So you think that – all right, so you – but your experience with Karzai is that he is that flighty and unpredictable that you're not surprised by anything he does?

MS. PSAKI: That's not – what I was talking about was the announcement and the rollout of the office, Matt. So that's what I was referring to.

QUESTION: Okay. So you think the problem here was the mishandling of the way the office was rolled out; that's what your position is?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, I think that where we are now is that --

QUESTION: No, no, no. I don't want to know where you're at. The problem that – what led President Karzai to doing what he did and saying what he said was that – was the – was because the rollout wasn't handled appropriately, not because of any greater problem that he might have with the entire idea --

MS. PSAKI: I'm not going to --

QUESTION: -- of negotiating through the process?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not going to attribute what his thinking was or what his reasons were.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS. PSAKI: But let me just point you to the fact that he has supported reconciliation long before the U.S. has, as you know, and he knows and believes this is the positive path forward.

QUESTION: All right. Okay. Is it your understanding now after the – post the second phone call with the Secretary that he is now okay, that he's been mollified that his concerns have been addressed and that negotiations on the security accord will continue? Or is there – are you not at that point yet?

MS. PSAKI: I don't want to characterize his view or how he feels. I just wanted to read out what we had done and why we feel it's important.

QUESTION: Okay. And then my last bit on this: You talked – I think you were asked about Dobbins' travel

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: Is he – I'm not asking about the meeting date in particular, but is he still planning to go to those three places that you said he was going to yesterday?

MS. PSAKI: He's still in Washington now.

QUESTION: So he didn't leave yesterday?

MS. PSAKI: He did not. And we're still in – or in discussions with the Afghan Government about the appropriate next steps, so I don't have any updates on if and when he'll travel.

QUESTION: But does – really? If and when? I mean, yesterday, it was pretty – you – it was pretty solid, it seemed pretty – you seemed pretty confident that he was leaving yesterday and that – without giving a date for a meeting in –-

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- with the Taliban, that he was going to go to these three places. That is now up in the air?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, we're – what we're determining is what is the best next step. So, based on what the best next step is, we'll determine his travel. He's got his passport; he's ready to go.

QUESTION: I would hope so. Okay.

QUESTION: And then the Secretary is also going to Doha, per your announcement.

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: Is he going to have any discussions related with – I mean, I don't expect that he would meet with the Taliban himself, but will he talk with the Qataris about this or maybe Afghans who happen to be in Doha?

MS. PSAKI: Well, as you saw from our announcement, the purpose of the trip is both to talk about bilateral issues, of course, which this is often one that is discussed, but also there's a meeting of the London 11 in Doha which is a big part of the reason why we'll be going there.

QUESTION: So in other words, it's mainly – you would say it's mainly Syria and not so much Afghanistan?

MS. PSAKI: Well, just that there are certainly a range of issues, including this, we expect will be discussed. But that's a big part of our purpose of the trip.

QUESTION: And just to put a fine point on it --

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- the Secretary is not going to be meeting with any Taliban in Doha --

MS. PSAKI: No.

QUESTION: -- at this office --

MS. PSAKI: No.

QUESTION: -- or visiting this political office or cutting a ribbon or anything like that? He's not going to be doing that?

MS. PSAKI: Not that is planned, Matt, no.

QUESTION: So was Special Representative Dobbins's travel postponed as a result of what happened overnight with the office and --

MS. PSAKI: Well, obviously, our focus is on what the next best steps are. And I know I've said this a few times, but it's very applicable here: We knew that this would be a bumpy road and a bumpy process. That's exactly what it is. And so when it's appropriate for him to travel, I'm sure he will travel. I just don't have an update on that at this point.

QUESTION: Yeah, I understand. I'm just wondering why yesterday there was an announcement made from the podium that he would be traveling to places where he would be going --

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- and then suddenly today, he's still here. What happened in the intervening period that stopped that?

MS. PSAKI: Well, clearly, we've talked about some of what's happened in the intervening period.

QUESTION: So that did impact the – his visit?

MS. PSAKI: Certainly.

QUESTION: It was a result of that?

QUESTION: Did you expect the road to be this bumpy this soon? (Laughter.) I mean, literally, you pulled out of the garage and you hit a major pothole instantly. (Laughter.)

MS. PSAKI: Matt, all you need is a jeep and you can drive right through.

QUESTION: It's that famous rearview mirror. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: So you're comparing the American foreign policy – the Administration is a jeep.

MS. PSAKI: No, I was just having a little fun with you.

QUESTION: Let's hope it's not one of the ones that's just been recalled.

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: Can I just ask one real easy question?

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

QUESTION: An easy question.

MS. PSAKI: I'm excited. (Laughter.)

QUESTION: During the Secretary's phone calls with President Karzai --

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- did he encourage Karzai to indeed send representatives from the High Peace Council to the meetings that were announced?

MS. PSAKI: Well, he clearly conveyed that the political process is the best process forward. Obviously, we know what the steps are, but in terms of specific asks, it was more a broad conversation about what's happened and where we need to go moving forward.

QUESTION: He would say, "Come on, Mr. President, please send your High Peace Council guys as planned?"

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think the Secretary understands that this is something that we have to continue to work on. The President knows what steps need to be taken, so it's not really a secret on either side, how they need to move the ball forward.

QUESTION: I missed the very top, so forgive me if you've already answered that in some form or another. But I'm struggling to understand exactly what went wrong. Did you fail to coordinate closely with President Karzai, with the details, before making this announcement? Was there a general understanding about the fact that this announcement would be made, but the details were not discussed? Or is he changing the goalposts?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would dispute that anything went wrong. This is a process which has been long coming, one that we've been long focused on, making – moving forward, as you know, as the President and the Secretary have spoken about this a number of times.

What I did at the top was read out that the President – I mean that the Secretary had spoken and reiterated our agreement that we don't recognize the name "Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," which, as you know, was what was displayed as the office was announced, and as you know, the Qataris have also taken steps to change the banner and change other pieces of how this is displayed.

So I would refer you to President Karzai and his statements and what he has said are his concerns here. But he has also stated in the past his broad support for a reconciliation process, which we also support, and that's what we're going to be focused on moving forward.

QUESTION: Just a follow-up. Did you coordinate and discuss the details of the announcement with President Karzai before making the decision to go forward with these talks?

MS. PSAKI: Obviously, there have been a lot of conversations. And I said also at the beginning that we were disappointed by how the office was opened, including all of the details that I just mentioned.

QUESTION: Did you say the Qataris were wrong, did something wrong?

MS. PSAKI: Again, these are issues about how the office was opened by the Taliban. We've been in close contact with the Qataris. I don't think I need to define it that way. There have been adjustments made, and I'll leave it at that.

QUESTION: Jen, can I just ask – I don't understand your logic. In your answer to Kim, you said, "I dispute that anything went wrong." (Laughter.) How are you able to say that?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Matt, what I meant --

QUESTION: You mean that everything went just fine and that you wanted Karzai to break off the talks and say he wasn't going to attend and he wasn't going to --

MS. PSAKI: Well, I've already said, which I think Kim and some others missed, including you, at the top, that we were disappointed --

QUESTION: Yes.

MS. PSAKI: -- by how the office was opened --

QUESTION: Right.

MS. PSAKI: -- that the Secretary had spoken with President Karzai and reiterated our support for and our opposition to the naming.

QUESTION: I got --

MS. PSAKI: So there are certain things that clearly did not go as planned.

QUESTION: Well --

MS. PSAKI: But again, the larger point here is that this is a process we knew would be challenging. There have been challenges. We've been talking about them and – but we're ready to move forward.

QUESTION: Afghan ministry folks in Kabul are saying that it's their understanding that there are sort of two diplomatic missions that are decoupled here. One is that the Americans can talk about Americans who have been kidnapped and the recovery of them, and then the other one is peace talks, and that when it comes to peace talks, Afghans have to be present. Is that the U.S. understanding?

MS. PSAKI: It's not just Afghans have to be present; it's Afghans talking to Afghans. It would be the Afghans determining if the U.S. have any kind of role in the room on that.

QUESTION: But – so is that the correct understanding, though, that any U.S.-Taliban meetings at this point are restricted in topic to simply the recovery of Americans' interests?

MS. PSAKI: No, I talked about this yesterday, so I'd point you to that --

QUESTION: Right.

MS. PSAKI: -- in terms of the broad range of issues that the U.S. is concerned about. So I mentioned, yes, absolutely, a discussion of Sergeant Bergdahl and others would be a part of what would be brought up and a part of what remains a concern. But the main dialogue would also be about the need for the Taliban to completely and verifiably break with terrorism, which is, of course, an end goal --

QUESTION: It's an end goal.

MS. PSAKI: -- of this entire process. So that would be a big part of our focus in our conversations as well.

QUESTION: So – but the Afghans are saying that that's their sticking point here; that when it comes to anything more than just pure U.S. interests, that they're not supportive of this process, period.

MS. PSAKI: That whom? The Taliban or the --

QUESTION: The Afghan Government and the Afghan ministry is saying that right now.

MS. PSAKI: Well, President Karzai has said many times that this is the preferred process, even before – or the ideal process, a political process moving toward reconciliation, even before the U.S. supported the process. So certainly there may be some officials who are opposed to that, but we still feel, as do many Afghans, that this is the right step and the right process moving forward.

QUESTION: So nothing has changed in the mission of these talks between yesterday, the office blowup, the breaking-off of the official meetings, and now?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think we've talked about a little bit of what's happened over the past 24 hours, but in terms of the bottom-line goal of what we're trying to accomplish, that is exactly the same.

QUESTION: So the Ambassador's trip is no longer definite?

MS. PSAKI: But our goal is the same, that's what I'm saying. What we'd like to accomplish here is exactly the same thing.

QUESTION: Well, and world peace and the end of hunger is also your goal at the --

MS. PSAKI: Well, we do have those as well, Matt.

QUESTION: Exactly. But you're about as close to getting to those goals as you are to this. But no – but the – the point is, is that the one significant thing is that – other than what was done on

the ground by President Karzai, the one significant thing that is different between yesterday, 24 hours ago, and now is that Ambassador Dobbins and presumably General Lute, their travel plans, which had meant to include a meeting in Doha with the Taliban, are now either on hold or postponed; is that correct? Or canceled altogether?

MS. PSAKI: Well, there, again, were – I don't have – we did talk about their plans yesterday. Right now, Ambassador Dobbins is in Washington. I don't have any planned travel for you to announce.

QUESTION: Right. Right.

MS. PSAKI: What I heard Margaret's question – and clarify for me if this is not what you were asking – what I was answering was what our end goal is here, what we're trying to accomplish here.

QUESTION: Not the end goal, the premise for the conversation. The Afghans are saying the premise for the conversation between America and Taliban they're cool with if it's just about American interests. Anything that involves Afghan-to-Afghan peace, they need to be part of and they're not okay with the separation of that.

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, and we talked about this a lot yesterday, so let me clarify some of the facts here. We've always thought and always said this would be Afghans talking to Afghans; the Afghans would determine if the U.S. would have a role here.

QUESTION: But the --

MS. PSAKI: But the U.S. has separate --

QUESTION: -- the first meeting is the U.S. and Taliban?

MS. PSAKI: The U.S. has a separate interest, our own stake and our own interests, which I just talked about, including them denouncing terrorism, including some of the issues with Sergeant Bergdahl as well, which we will discuss. But in terms of the reconciliation process, that is a process – Afghans between Afghans. That's – that hasn't changed from yesterday to today to a month ago and longer.

QUESTION: But for the Afghans, that's a problem for them.

MS. PSAKI: I'm not sure what you're saying the problem is.

QUESTION: The fact that the first meeting is going to be between the United States and the Taliban. Has that changed?

MS. PSAKI: Well, because we're working with the Afghans on what the next appropriate step is, there isn't a meeting. I know there were reports of it, but reports of a meeting being scheduled or on the books aren't accurate. I also didn't confirm them yesterday, to be clear. But beyond that, the process is going to be – this is what I'm just trying to get at as I'm hearing the issue they're raising – is Afghans talking to Afghans about how the reconciliation process moves forward. If there's a role for the U.S. to play in that, that's up to the Afghans to decide.

QUESTION: Just to – wait, just to button up on it. So the U.S.-Taliban meeting is now on hold as the broader process is also on hold; there will not be a U.S.-Taliban meeting, period, right now until we move forward as part of this conversation?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we're in coordination and in discussion with the Afghans and the High Peace Council about how to move forward.

QUESTION: So on that – on this point that you just mentioned --

QUESTION: When you say the reports weren't accurate, can you clarify what you mean there? There was never a meeting scheduled or --

MS. PSAKI: Well, there was – there were reports yesterday of one being scheduled Thursday, which we didn't confirm from here. So again, we're continuing to work on the process, and as we have more to update you all on, I'm sure we will.

QUESTION: Jen, you said that the United States did talk numerous times with President Karzai

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: -- of course, in setting this up. Did the U.S. talk directly with the Taliban about setting this up, in other words, perhaps telling them here are the ground rules? Was there anything like that?

MS. PSAKI: Well, our end goals here have been very clear both publicly and privately. I'm not sure when the last conversation was on that. I'm happy to look into that. But it – there has been no secret about what we wanted to accomplish and what we felt the end goal should be here.

QUESTION: Jen, on something that you said, just to clarify, you said that the U.S. will participate if the Afghans wanted to participate. So if one or two parties decide that no, we don't want the U.S. to participate, would that be acceptable to you?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Said, I'm not going to get ahead of where we are. We're obviously --

QUESTION: But you said that.

MS. PSAKI: Let me just finish. We're obviously in discussions, we're working very closely. I mentioned two calls just today, over the last 24 hours, the Secretary himself has had. We are committed to a process. There is broad agreement that that is the right process. But again, I'm not going to get ahead of where we are and what it means. I think there's been some confusion about the different components of this.

QUESTION: Jen, there's another thing. Senator Casey issued a statement on women's rights in Afghanistan, and he said that he's very concerned about these recent attempts by the government – actually, I should say, I guess, their parliament – to erode women's rights and political representation, and now especially, he said, with the reports about talking with the Taliban. What is the State Department's position? There's apparently a new draft of an electoral law that takes away some of the provisions for women to be represented. Senator Casey is saying it's dangerously undermining gains by women in the political arena in the past decade. What does the U.S. think about that?

MS. PSAKI: Well, we share the concern. We're aware that the parliament is considering its election legislation that would remove the requirement that 25 percent of provisional council seats be reserved for women. We urge the Afghan Government to uphold the rights previously granted to women in an effort to protect their political participation. Certainly, as you know, we broadly support, of course, women not only participating in the process but also being in elected office. And this is a point that we have made to the Afghan Government as well.

QUESTION: To President Karzai?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not sure if it was part of the conversations over the last 24 hours, but certainly our position is known there.

QUESTION: Jen, to clarify the disappointment that you mentioned, had you discussed this name before the meeting that you had – before the announcement, the name which will appear in front of this office?

MS. PSAKI: Yes.

QUESTION: And Taliban changed it, that name?

MS. PSAKI: Again, there was agreement about what the name of the office would be to indicate what the purpose of the office would be.

QUESTION: And the Taliban changed that name later?

MS. PSAKI: I don't think I need to confirm that for you.

QUESTION: Was there anything other than that that was disappointing about the ceremony, or was that just – was that the main thing?

MS. PSAKI: I think that --

QUESTION: I mean, the photo op didn't – wasn't a problem for you?

MS. PSAKI: Clearly, the --

QUESTION: I mean, what was in the photo --

MS. PSAKI: Clearly, the rollout, Matt, on that end was disappointing.

QUESTION: Well, but I mean, specifically, was there anything other than the name about the rollout that was problematic for you guys or that was disappointing for you guys?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think you're familiar with what – some of the components of this. And again, we were hopeful that this would be moving things forward, but we are still committed to the process.

QUESTION: What was the name that you agreed?

MS. PSAKI: It's the same one that I've stated a couple of times, which is the Political Office of the Afghan Taliban.

QUESTION: And how soon do you hope to end this stalemate, and what should the Afghan Government do in order to let this process move on?

MS. PSAKI: I'm sorry, can you repeat it just one more time?

QUESTION: And how soon do you hope to end this stalemate in the process, and what should the Afghan Government do to encourage this process to move on?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think we've – I've read out a couple of calls and indicated to you a couple of the steps that have been taken over the past 24 hours. And let me just reiterate here that we knew this would be challenging – the President said that just this morning – there would be bumps in the road. We were prepared for that, and so we're going to focus on moving forward.

QUESTION: Jen, what is a political office?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, the purpose of this whole process is to move towards a political reconciliation and not be representative of any particular government or body, but to move towards reconciling all the parties.

QUESTION: So there's no particular, like, legal --

QUESTION: Diplomatic sense?

QUESTION: -- diplomatic meaning to that word, "political office," other than just it's not a military office?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think it was important to be clear on what the purpose of the office was.

QUESTION: Could you just clarify quickly why this office in Qatar, not in Afghanistan? And second finally, are you hoping that one day, someday Taliban will be back in political power in Afghanistan?

MS. PSAKI: Well, you're getting a bit ahead of where we are, Goyal, but the goal here is to move this to Afghanistan. The Government of Qatar, of course, offered to have this office there and have it under conditions that would help move this process forward, which was why it was a positive step. Said?

QUESTION: -- who is responsible for building this particular bump in the road? I mean, clearly there must have been an agreement between yourselves, the Taliban, and Afghanistan to have this rollout yesterday. And as Matt said, you're not even out of the garage door yet. I mean, was it the Taliban that gleefully kind of seized on this opportunity to give itself some kind of diplomatic recognition and status which you hadn't agreed to? Or was it the United States that didn't set their terms clearly? Whose fault was it?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not going to place fault or blame. Again, this is a case where the circumstances and the conditions were clear. Obviously, the course of the last 12 hours, as we've talked about a bit, has been a bump in the road. But where our focus is now is moving forward. But I'm not going to place blame or anything along those lines.

QUESTION: So the conditions were clear to whom, exactly?

MS. PSAKI: To all parties involved.

QUESTION: To three parties involved.

MS. PSAKI: I'm not sure which three parties --

QUESTION: Well, I would talk about the United States, the Taliban, and Afghanistan.

QUESTION: And Qatar.

MS. PSAKI: And Qatar.

QUESTION: And Qatar. Sorry, four parties.

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm. Yep.

QUESTION: So all four parties had agreed to terms over the previous months --

MS. PSAKI: Correct.

QUESTION: -- how it was supposed to happen?

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: So somebody changed the conditions. Who was it?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not going to get into a blame game from here. I think our focus is on moving forward and what's productive to do just that.

June 18, 2013

Jen Psaki, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan
Washington, DC

QUESTION: The Secretary in fact just said, "Good news, very pleased with what's taken place." So what's the good news? I mean, what realistically does the U.S. expect, hope from these talks?

MS. PSAKI: Well, let me just start by saying we've long said that this conflict will likely – excuse me – not be won on the battlefield, and that is why we support this office. But neither do we plan to let up on our fight against international terrorism in Afghanistan, or our support to Afghan forces who will very soon be in the lead for operations throughout the country. Our military and diplomatic efforts continue to be mutually reinforcing. Just wanted to say that at the topic.

But this is something that – as President Obama reaffirmed with President Karzai in Januaray, an Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace and reconciliation process is the surest way to end violence and ensure lasting stability in Afghanistan and the region. And as you know, the Secretary, on his second trip as Secretary of State, also went to Afghanistan and also reaffirmed the belief that this was an important step. These statements represent an important first step toward reconciliation, the outcome of which must be that the Taliban and other insurgent groups break ties with al-Qaida and violence and accept Afghanistan's constitution, including its protections for women and minorities.

But it's important because it is a first step that hasn't happened until today. And so, of course, that's why it's a significant announcement. Let me just review – because I know people are following this closely, but – what has happened today. So today the Taliban has released a statement that said two things: that they oppose the use of Afghan soil to threaten other countries, and they support an Afghan peace process. The U.S., of course, acknowledges, as is evidenced by our briefings and the Secretary's comments, these statements for which we have long called and which fulfill the requirements for the Taliban to open an office in Doha for the purpose of negotiations with the Afghan Government.

The Qataris have also issued a statement announcing the opening of an office with the name Political Office of the Afghan Taliban. The statement also laid out the narrow purpose of this office. And finally, we would note that Qatar recognizes the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as the legitimate Government of Afghanistan, and they enjoy full diplomatic relations.

QUESTION: What does it mean, a "narrow purpose of this office"?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I think it's going to what I was stating, that this is a part of a step, this is an important first step. But again, there are – we've always said Afghan-led, Afghans talking to Afghans is an important part of our transition. But it doesn't – it's not the end of our transition, so this is starting the process.

QUESTION: And when you look at their statement, there is that line, "will not allow anyone to use the Afghan land to threaten anyone." So that's the line that you're talking about.

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: That's not talking directly about the – about al-Qaida, but ultimately the U.S. wants them to very directly cut their links publicly with al-Qaida, correct?

MS. PSAKI: That is the end goal, yes.

QUESTION: So this is enough?

MS. PSAKI: This is an important statement. This allows us to get the process started. And as you know, there are some end goals in this process.

QUESTION: So just to be clear on Jill's point, the Taliban are not required to disown, disavow, or disassociate themselves publicly with al-Qaida to have --

MS. PSAKI: That is a part of the end goal of the process.

QUESTION: Right. But to begin the process, to talk with them, they don't have to do that? This is not a precondition for them participating?

MS. PSAKI: Correct.

QUESTION: Where in their statement does it talk about respecting the rights of women in the Afghan constitution?

MS. PSAKI: Well, that is respecting the constitution, which is an end goal of the process, is – has that included in it.

QUESTION: So that's up for negotiation?

MS. PSAKI: No, it certainly is not. That's something that we feel is vital.

QUESTION: Well, then, if that – but if it's not – I don't get it. If they haven't agreed to respect the constitution, then it must mean that it's up for negotiation.

MS. PSAKI: It's not up for negotiation. That is the end goal of the process. This is just a beginning. The opening of the office is just a beginning of the process.

QUESTION: Okay. But, I mean, they have to come to that conclusion.

MS. PSAKI: Correct.

QUESTION: Well, then I don't get why you're so happy because they – I mean, they're --

MS. PSAKI: I don't – don't indicate my --

QUESTION: Well, the Secretary said – I mean, "It's good news, we're very pleased at what's taken place," and I'm not sure I get – if they haven't agreed to do the things that you want them to do, except for these – this one statement with the two parts of it – and – but that those are still the end goal of the – I'm not – it must mean that these are things that are up for negotiation. Otherwise --

MS. PSAKI: I don't believe – they're not up for negotiation. Those are – those were defined as the end goal of the process.

QUESTION: All right. So you're hoping that the Afghans will convince the Taliban, their brethren, to respect the constitution and the rights of minorities and women in their conversations, which means that that is up for negotiation?

MS. PSAKI: It's not up for negotiation. That is the end goal of the process of reconciliation. This is a first step in the process. I'm not overestimating or overstating what it means, but certainly, a first step is one farther step than we had just a few days ago.

QUESTION: But do they say in the statement that they renounce terrorism?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have the statement in front of me. We're happy to get that around to everybody. But they – as Jill stated, the statement did state that they oppose the use of Afghan soil to threaten other countries, and they support an Afghan-led peace process.

QUESTION: And then there was – there's some – I think some official said on background that there would be a meeting – a U.S.-Taliban meeting in the coming days.

MS. PSAKI: Let me give you --

QUESTION: Do you have any --

MS. PSAKI: It's not yet scheduled. We're in the process of scheduling it, but --

QUESTION: Is that – would that be Jim Dobbins?

MS. PSAKI: Correct. Let me give you an update on his travel schedule as well to help you along those lines.

Ambassador James Dobbins, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, will be departing today for travel to Ankara, Turkey; to Doha, Qatar, and with onward travel to Afghanistan and Pakistan currently planned. The trip is primarily focused on reconciliation efforts. He will have meetings with a number of officials at each stop, and we'll be reading those out, of course, after they conclude.

QUESTION: Do you know who from the Taliban is (1) going to be staffing this office, and (2) who he – Mr. Dobbins, Ambassador Dobbins – will see?

MS. PSAKI: Well, the meetings are still being scheduled, so I don't have any update on who he'll meet with and I don't have the names yet of who will be participating at it.

QUESTION: All right. And presumably, just – and I just want to make sure of this, that this meeting, when – it will be in Doha, right? I mean, that's why he's going to Doha? Or will it be someplace else?

MS. PSAKI: Well, that's where the office is, but again, he'll have meetings throughout his travel, and he has onward travel planned to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

QUESTION: No, no, but – so he might meet with the Taliban in Afghanistan or Pakistan --

MS. PSAKI: I don't have any --

QUESTION: -- or Turkey?

MS. PSAKI: -- specifics on his planned meetings. I just didn't want to understate who he'll be meeting with and where.

QUESTION: Okay. All right.

MS. PSAKI: Jill.

QUESTION: And again, these are the first formal talks, right?

MS. PSAKI: With the --

QUESTION: With the Taliban.

MS. PSAKI: Afghan-Afghan, yes.

QUESTION: Right. Between the United States formally --

MS. PSAKI: Well, as you know, there was a time ago where we did talk with them.

QUESTION: Right.

MS. PSAKI: But this is, of course, a different step forward.

QUESTION: Were those considered formal talks, though, before? I mean, how historic is this? Is this the first formal talks for this --

MS. PSAKI: I'd have to look back and see how we defined them at the time, but this is certainly part of a process which is being led by Afghans speaking to Afghans as part of their efforts to move forward on a reconciliation process. The U.S., of course, has a stake here, and we believe it is important for the Taliban to begin, of course, meaningful discussions as soon as possible, both with the Afghans and with us. And the main dialogue we want to support is among Afghans, but there are some issues we, the U.S., want to discuss with the Taliban directly, most notably our concerns about Taliban connections to international terrorism.

And we are in Afghanistan, as you all know, because the attack against the United States on 9/11 was planned there by al-Qaida under shelter offered by the Taliban. An important focus for our meetings moving forward with the Taliban will be the need for them to completely and verifiably break with terrorism. So that is, of course, a priority of the U.S. as we look to proceed with our negotiations.

QUESTION: When were with Secretary Kerry in Kabul back in March, he stood next to President Karzai, and President Karzai said that they had already started talking informally with the Taliban members. He laid out some of the end goals that you've enumerated here. Again, what has changed in the diplomacy between March and now in this press release?

MS. PSAKI: Well, there are several components. Obviously, this is an Afghan-led process, so I would point you to them on why these talks and why – are proceeding now, or the Taliban of course --

QUESTION: Well, you have the confidence now to do something we weren't confident enough to do in March, so is there something on the way?

MS. PSAKI: Well, as you know, this is something that the President, President Obama, that Secretary Kerry have all said is an important step forward. We wanted to have the appropriate conditions to do just that. Again, there are several players in this, most importantly the Afghans themselves. And so they have decided to move forward with this. Obviously, the U.S. has a stake and has a role here, but again, it's led by the Afghans.

QUESTION: But there wasn't a specific gesture of goodwill or anything other than this Taliban announcement?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have anything further to read out for you on that point.

QUESTION: Jen, it is Afghan-led, but then it is correct that the United States will be the first people who will meet --

MS. PSAKI: Correct, mm-hmm.

QUESTION: But why is that? Why wouldn't the first meeting be between the Afghans?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I mentioned a bit of the U.S. stake here and the issues we feel are vitally important to discuss. That will certainly be a part of that process. This is an Afghan process moving forward, and certainly will be Afghan-led and Afghan-focused moving forward. But as I mentioned, the U.S. has a stake. Obviously, the State Department, the White House, and others have been engaged in this process, the Secretary has been, and so that may be the order of meetings.

QUESTION: On the issue of Afghan-led, is that – does that mean that if Karzai, for whatever reason, decides not to go to these talks, that he can veto these talks between the United States and the Taliban?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not sure I would speculate on that. Obviously, everybody is engaged --

QUESTION: No. I mean, explain to us what --

MS. PSAKI: -- in moving this forward, Said. That's where our focus is. As I mentioned, Ambassador Dobbins has some travel. We've seen some statements across the region, and we're hopeful that these talks will move forward.

QUESTION: Is there any specific reason that – why Qatar has been chosen as a venue for these negotiations?

MS. PSAKI: Why the office is in Doha?

QUESTION: Yeah. Because of pick of Taliban or you were involved with the decision process?

MS. PSAKI: I'm not actually certain of the history there. I'm happy to look into that for you.

QUESTION: Because there were two different states who were competing to be venue. One was Istanbul.

QUESTION: Let her guess what the other country was. (Laughter.)

MS. PSAKI: Well, I would point you to the government of – that is funny, I don't know how to figure it out – I would point you to the Government of Qatar on this, but I'm happy to check if there's any more – anything I can enumerate for all of you.

QUESTION: Can I just ask you, does this mean that the U.S. now regards the Taliban as a legitimate fighting group, a legitimate enemy, unlike enemy – before, it was – they were kind of – they were classified enemy combatants, or as non – they were non-state actors, obviously, but that they – but they weren't regarded as legal enemies. Does this mean that that is now over? And then as a corollary to that, does the Administration believe that the Taliban have legitimate concerns about the way things are in Afghanistan right now, in terms of governance? Or do you think that President Karzai's government – or regardless of who the president is – that the government that exists there right now is best for the Afghan people?

MS. PSAKI: Well, let me answer the first question first, as makes sense in order. This is the beginning of the process. There are steps that need to be taken. Obviously, I've outlined the U.S. stake here and what needs to happen. But we're not going to judge the outcome.

As you know, we are – still have troops on the ground in Afghanistan. We still – our goal in Afghanistan continues to be to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaida to ensure that the country can never again be a safe haven for terrorists. We're doing both at the same time, talking and winding down our fighting in the country.

On the second question – and just repeat your second question for me again.

QUESTION: Well, I'm just curious to know if the Administration thinks that the Taliban have legitimate concerns about the way that Afghanistan is being run.

MS. PSAKI: Well, Matt, I mean, the Taliban are obviously a key component here, and that's why we believe that they should be – begin their negotiations and why this is an important step in that process.

QUESTION: Okay. But according to you, these are negotiations, but what is not negotiable in these negotiations is respect for the current constitution.

MS. PSAKI: Well, that is the end goal, the end plan, what we would like to see at the end of these negotiations. And that has been --

QUESTION: So then --

MS. PSAKI: -- that has been outlined and been clear for some time.

QUESTION: Okay. But then you don't believe that the Taliban have legitimate concerns that need to be addressed in negotiations, or you do believe that they have legitimate concerns that

can be – that should be addressed in negotiations? And if they do, what are those legitimate concerns in the view of the Administration?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I'll let them outline their own concerns, Matt. But I mean, moving toward a reconciliation – our end goal here --

QUESTION: I understand that. But either you think that their concerns have merit or you don't.

MS. PSAKI: Well, obviously we feel that a reconciliation process between all parties is important. I'm not going to validate one set of concerns over another. But in order to move toward a more stable Afghanistan, we feel this is an important part of the process.

QUESTION: I'm going to carry on with what Matt's question is about – negotiating, the legality of it. I mean, in the eyes of the U.S., is Taliban a terrorist group?

MS. PSAKI: Well, I'm not sure how they're defined at this particular moment.

QUESTION: Yeah.

MS. PSAKI: But the important thing here is that we've long said that moving toward a reconciliation process, of which they are a key part – the President has said this, the Secretary has said this – is an important part of moving towards a more stable Afghanistan. That's why we support these efforts. That's why we've been so engaged, why the Secretary has been so engaged, at every level of the government.

QUESTION: And how will the negotiations – I mean, surely the release of Bergdahl will be part of that, as well as surely the Taliban are going to be demanding the release of the Guantanamo Bay Taliban commanders. What is the response going to be on that?

MS. PSAKI: Well, let me first say the United States – and you asked me this question sort of but – has not made the decision at this point to transfer any Taliban detainees from Guantanamo Bay, though, of course, we expect the Taliban to raise this issue. As we've long said, we'll make any such decisions in consultation with Congress and according to U.S. law. And as we talked about yesterday, we, of course, very committed to closing Guantanamo.

On the question of other issues we will raise, I talked about a number of them, but absolutely we will want to talk with the Taliban about the safe return of Sergeant Bergdahl. He has been gone far too long, and we continue to call for and work towards his safe and immediate release.

QUESTION: Do these talks have the backing of members of Congress, considering they want to block the transfer of those – the release of those Taliban commanders? I mean, is – would Congress not see it – I guess I could ask them, but would they not see this as negotiating with the enemy in a way?

MS. PSAKI: Well, there are several steps in this process we anticipate, of course. We're at the beginning of the journey here, so to speak. And of course, consulting with Congress on every step will be a big part of this process, and we will venture to do that in the weeks ahead. And any decision and any part of the negotiation we will be in consultation with them.

QUESTION: I guess I'm just not clear on this whole negotiation, but you have a set endpoint. This is not a surrender, clearly. You don't believe that there's a – clearly a military victory here, so it's not like Germany or Japan after the Second World War. So there is, in fact, a negotiation that has to go on.

But if you've already decided on what the end goal, the terms – obviously the end – the overreaching end goal is to have Afghanistan at peace and not a threat to anybody around it. But you – up and to that point there has to be negotiation to make it worthwhile for the Taliban. And if you don't – if you say that – if you've already set out what the end goal is in terms of them having to respect the existing constitution exactly the way it's written with the protections for minorities and women, then I don't get how it's a negotiation. Either you think that these are points that can be negotiated, that the Taliban have legitimate concerns that have merit and can be addressed in a negotiation, or you don't.

MS. PSAKI: Well, our outcome and what we would like to see here, as you mentioned, has not been secret. We've laid this out very clearly, publicly and privately.

QUESTION: Well, I'm not saying that it is secret. I just don't understand what they're negotiating.

MS. PSAKI: Well, they're negotiating how to reconcile their efforts on both sides.

QUESTION: Yeah. But the Taliban come in and the Afghans say you have to respect the constitution and every single thing that it means, and the Taliban say well, we don't like this part or we don't like this part. And that – but you're saying that can't be negotiated. So I --

MS. PSAKI: Well, Matt, clearly there are stakes from both sides that are prompting them to move back to the process here. I'm sure they will all have lots to say about that.

QUESTION: All right.

MS. PSAKI: But we feel it's an important step forward.

QUESTION: Can I just go back to who exactly is going to be negotiating? Is it Ambassador Dobbins?

MS. PSAKI: He will be a part of that process, of course, as the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. He, of course, has a team, but that is the purpose of his travel, is to focus on reconciliation efforts.

QUESTION: Sorry. He's going to be part of the Afghan-to-Afghan talks?

MS. PSAKI: No, no. He is a part of the U.S. having meetings with the Taliban, being a part of this process, of which we obviously have a stake.

QUESTION: Right. I understand.

MS. PSAKI: He is the primary person leading that effort.

QUESTION: But do you have anything to negotiate with the Taliban?

MS. PSAKI: No. That would be up to the Afghans to – if they wanted the U.S. to have a role in that. But it is Afghans talking to Afghans. As I said, the U.S. has our own stakes and our own issues that we want to discuss here moving forward.

QUESTION: And that would be mainly the release of Bergdahl and --

MS. PSAKI: Certainly he would be a part of that, as well as some of the issues I outlined earlier about the need for them to completely and verifiably break with terrorism.

QUESTION: But those issues are negotiable?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, we're going to sit down with the Taliban and discuss them. That's part of what the – what Ambassador Dobbins will be doing.

QUESTION: But I don't understand – okay, I don't understand how you negotiate that. If you tell them they have to renounce terrorism, what's the negotiation there?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, Matt --

QUESTION: There's not any – there's no room for – you have to release our guy and you have to renounce terrorism, and that's it. That doesn't seem to me – there's no negotiation. That's ultimatum.

MS. PSAKI: All sides are coming to this with their own stakes.

QUESTION: Okay.

MS. PSAKI: I'm sure they will have plenty to say. Those are what the U.S. is hoping to accomplish through the process.

QUESTION: Okay. And just to make it clear, Dobbins is not going to be in the Afghan-to-Afghan talks? Or is he?

MS. PSAKI: No. It would be up to the Afghans if they --

QUESTION: If they want him there.

MS. PSAKI: -- want us to participate. But he's having meetings primarily focused on the reconciliation efforts.

QUESTION: Gotcha. And at part of his trip right now, does that currently entail attending or observing an Afghan-Taliban --

MS. PSAKI: This is so new, the meetings are still being scheduled. But I will – as we have updates, we're happy to provide them.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Yeah, Jen, some of the wires are already reporting it's happening on Thursday, that meeting. Can you tell us – if you can't confirm that date, maybe you can – can you tell us at least what the access will be?

MS. PSAKI: The media access? I'd have --

QUESTION: Yeah. Will there be debriefs? Will there be any information shared from them?

MS. PSAKI: We will be reading out meetings as they complete. And I actually didn't have – the meetings were still being scheduled as I came down here, so maybe they happened rapidly. But I'm happy to check if Thursday is accurate, and we can confirm that for all of you, if so, following the briefing.

QUESTION: Can we change topic?

QUESTION: Taliban?

MS. PSAKI: Sure.

QUESTION: When Secretary spoke with the Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, was this an issue of discussion? Did he discuss with him this Taliban statement?

MS. PSAKI: Not that I'm aware of. That wasn't the focus of the call. It was the issues that I outlined in terms of Pakistan participation, which I'm betting is where you're getting at here. This is really a question, of course, for the Afghan Government. We've long said that we

appreciate Pakistan's public statements in support of Afghan-led reconciliation. We'll continue to closely coordinate with Pakistan in support of these efforts.

QUESTION: And on – since the Taliban will be having talks with both the U.S. and Afghan Government, would U.S. be open to the idea of Taliban having talks with other neighboring countries like India or Iran? Because India had never had any talks or relations with the Taliban. Iran did had some.

MS. PSAKI: I don't think we're going to get ahead of the announcement today. And as – if there are updates to provide, we're happy to provide them.

QUESTION: And several Taliban leaders are on a most-wanted list. Is the U.S. moving ahead in delisting them? That has been one of the conditions for the Taliban.

MS. PSAKI: Again, this is just the first step in the process. There is a journey to go here. So it's significant because we are taking a step in the process, but there need to be negotiations, there need to be discussions. The U.S. will have some, Afghans will have some, but I'm not going to get ahead of what the end results will be.

QUESTION: Thank you.

QUESTION: Do you anticipate Secretary Kerry taking a direct role at any point in this process, or will it mostly be led on the ground by Ambassador Dobbins?

MS. PSAKI: Well, Secretary Kerry is deeply – has been deeply engaged in this effort and has – cares deeply about the outcome. In terms of what his involvement will be moving forward beyond this next trip, I don't want to get ahead of where we are in the process.

June 10, 2013

Jen Psaki, Spokesperson Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: Thank you. How do you see the terrorist attack on the Kabul International Airport – how --

MS. PSAKI: Well, let me just – we condemn, of course, in the strongest terms the Taliban attack on the facilities in the vicinity of Kabul International Airport early Monday morning. We do note that the Afghanistan National Police led the successful operation to secure the airport with ISAF advisors in a mentoring role only.

QUESTION: But do – are you confident enough that given this major attack on the Kabul International Airport, Afghan national security forces are strong enough to protect the nations after 2014?

MS. PSAKI: Well, again, we felt it was, of course, positive that the Afghanistan National Police led the successful operation to secure the airport. And beyond that, we remain focused on working with our counterparts there to discuss a BSA and to discuss plans for post-2014 on how we can best coordinate on that front.

QUESTION: On BSA, do you have any timeline? Do you think what stage we are --

MS. PSAKI: I don't have any update on that for you.

May 23, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Acting Deputy Spokesperson Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: Thank you. Let me ask you differently, Patrick. Do we see any change in the region? We have a new government in – going in Pakistan. And also I understand Secretary is visiting India, if you can give some details, any changes as far as Afghanistan is going to be different things going next year.

MR. VENTRELL: Are you asking about our relationship with Afghanistan or India or Pakistan? I heard three or four --

QUESTION: (Inaudible) in the region, any changes. Do you see any changes in the region?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, that's a very broad question. On Pakistan, you know that we've worked to identify our shared interests and act on them jointly. You know what's happening in Afghanistan in terms of our transition to an Afghan lead and our partnership there. And you know our deep relationship with the Indian Government as well. So I don't have a specific – it doesn't sound like there's a specific news answer that you want in there, but that's broadly where we are in the relationship.

QUESTION: Can I just – one more quickly. Can you confirm if Secretary – Deputy Secretary Burns was in India recently, if had delivered a letter from the President to the Prime Minister of India as far as his visit to the United States is concerned? And also I guess Secretary is now going to visit India.

MR. VENTRELL: I don't have anything in terms of the Secretary's schedule or travel. I'd have to check in on the Deputy's visit, whether there was a letter. I don't have any information on that.

QUESTION: And on the letter --

MR. VENTRELL: I don't have any --

QUESTION: -- if Deputy Secretary Burns --

MR. VENTRELL: I don't have any information on that. I'm happy to check into it.

May 20, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Acting Deputy Spokesperson Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: The President of Afghanistan is visiting India, and both local media reports in both India and Afghanistan area saying that he is visiting to seek reliable military supplies for Afghanistan armed forces post-2014. Given any apprehensions Pakistan might have because of this, is U.S. okay with India supplying military (inaudible) to Afghanistan?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, first of all, for the details of the trip I refer you – again, this is another of two governments – but this is between India and Afghanistan. But we welcome efforts by Afghanistan's neighbors and other regional actors to promote Afghanistan's stability and economic development. We continue to welcome India's generous bilateral assistance program with Afghanistan, its leadership on private sector investment there, its leadership promoting regional economic integration and linkages. I don't have anything for you on a military – of a military relationship.

QUESTION: On economic part, Afghanistan, being a land-locked country, is having trouble exporting its things – agricultural things and other things – out of the country to either Pakistan or Iran. Are you helping them out to explore some third, alternative routes to include exports?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, I understand we have the New Silk Road Initiative, and that helps linkages throughout that whole corridor. But I'm not sure if you're referring to one particular activity or another.

QUESTION: That leaves Pakistan, and Pakistan has been blocking them to – they have a lot of different --

MR. VENTRELL: Again, I'm not aware of any other particular initiative.

May 17, 2013

Jen Psaki, Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan
Washington, DC

QUESTION: Afghanistan.

MS. PSAKI: Mm-hmm.

QUESTION: President Karzai's office issued a brief statement today that he spoke to Secretary

Kerry. Do you have any details on the readout, what were the issues they discussed?

MS. PSAKI: I do, I do.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS. PSAKI: So Secretary Kerry spoke this morning with President Karzai. They discussed our joint progress on the bilateral security agreement, border issues, and the status of the ongoing peace process. Secretary Kerry also affirmed that he and President Karzai remain committed to the same strategy and the same goal of a stable, sovereign Afghanistan, responsible for its own security and able to ensure that it can never again be a safe haven for terrorists.

QUESTION: Do you know when this BSA will be signed? What's the status on that?

MS. PSAKI: I don't have any specific update on that. Again, it's obviously something that we continue to work on, work very closely on at many levels with the Government of Afghanistan.

May 9, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Acting Deputy Spokesperson Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: I've got a question about Afghanistan.

MR. VENTRELL: Okay.

QUESTION: President Hamid Karzai said that the U.S. has requested nine bases after the 2014 withdrawal. Is that the case?

MR. VENTRELL: So this is about the – what President Karzai said on the base issue. And my colleague, Jay Carney, has already addressed this today, but just to reiterate, as President Obama has made clear, the U.S. does not seek permanent military bases in Afghanistan. We envision that the bilateral security agreement will address access to and use of Afghan facilities by U.S. forces. So you know that the bilateral security agreement is still being negotiated. We have a lead negotiator here at the State Department. We're not going to get into the details of those negotiations that are ongoing, but they continue.

QUESTION: But the U.S. would seek access to facility – Afghan facilities across the country so troops could deploy across the country?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, again, we're not going to get into specific facilities or numbers. This is something that's being negotiated. But the President has been clear: The U.S. does not seek permanent military bases in Afghanistan.

QUESTION: So you're saying no to what he – you're saying what he's saying is not true.

MR. VENTRELL: Well, again, what I'm saying is we're not – and the President has said this and this is something we've been consistent about – seeking permanent military bases. In terms of the negotiations with the Afghans about our presence going forward and the bilateral security agreement, that's still being negotiated. And as I mentioned, here at the State Department we have a lead negotiator, Mr. Warlick, who continues his work.

QUESTION: Is the U.S. seeking temporary base, maybe 10 years, 20 years, as to what the President might be referring to nine temporary bases for 20 years in Afghanistan?

MR. VENTRELL: Again, I think we'd just say that this is the access and use of Afghan facilities by U.S. forces. But again, this is in terms of us changing our presence in Afghanistan. You know that we're obviously going into 2014 as this goes to a full Afghan lead, as we work

through our civilian and our development assistance. And so that's the change. We're not talking about leaving thousands of U.S. forces in Afghanistan in perpetuity. That's not what anybody has been talking about and that's not been the aim.

QUESTION: What's the duration of that – those access they are seeking from?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, again, these are being negotiated as part of the bilateral security agreement, so I don't have an update one way or another.

QUESTION: Patrick, as far as leaving Afghanistan 2014, what kind of message or messages the U.S. Government or the NATO is sending to the Taliban or terrorists, who still remains the question mark there? And also, if you can say something about the second anniversary of the death of Usama bin Ladin. Is that now end of terrorism or end of legacy of Usama bin Ladin?

MR. VENTRELL: Would you repeat the first part of your question? You tied a number of things there together. Go ahead.

QUESTION: Oh, I mean, as far as leaving 2014, what kind of messages you think you are sending to the Taliban or terrorists who still – or remaining still active in the region or around the globe.

MR. VENTRELL: Again, remember, Goyal, our post-2014 mission is to train Afghan forces and target the remnants of al-Qaida and their affiliates. But we've been clear about the successes that we've had in terms of core al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but that's what the post-2014 force is about.

QUESTION: Usama bin Ladin?

MR. VENTRELL: And again, we've talked about how we took out Usama bin Ladin and some of the core leadership of al-Qaida, and any of the remnants, that's part of the post-2014.

April 30, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Acting Deputy Spokesperson Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: President Karzai has admitted that his – that the U.S. gives his office cash funds, cash payments, outside of the other aid that the U.S. is giving. Doesn't this fuel corruption?

MR. VENTRELL: We talked a little bit about this yesterday, and I said I didn't have anything for you one way or another. What I can say in terms of our efforts to reduce corruption and to increase transparency – you know that's been a focus of this Department and something we've worked very hard on – and this goes back to the mutual accountability framework to which the international community and the Afghan Government agreed at Tokyo. That was the Tokyo conference. And we expect the Government of Afghanistan will follow through on these important commitments.

So we continue to work with our international partners, and we remain committed to supporting Afghanistan's anti-corruption efforts. And this is sort of, broadly speaking, about increasing transparency and accountability, building judicial capacity and rule of law. We've been clear that there's more work to be done, and we'll continue to help Afghan authorities in that regard.

QUESTION: Yes. But if you are providing – if the United States is providing actual cash, which is an invitation to disaster, wouldn't it be a good idea to take the step that the U.S. can take immediately and stop that?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, I said I didn't have any information for you on that one way or another. This Department and the work that we do is to implement sustainable development programs and to help build up Afghan institutions and do so in a way that will help them function as they increasingly – as Afghans take the lead for their security across the country and manage their own affairs. And that's the focus of our efforts in Afghanistan.

QUESTION: Do you consider off-the-books cash, paid by one government to another in order to gain influence, no matter who it is; do you consider that a form of corruption in itself?

MR. VENTRELL: Look, I'm not going to make a broad --

QUESTION: If Russia were to pay cash to India or whoever and said, "Here, here's some money, we want influence in your country's decision-making and in how you guys run your country," would you consider that corruption?

MR. VENTRELL: Look, Brad, I'm not going to make a broad sweeping statement on a hypothetical.

QUESTION: No? It sounded like you said --

MR. VENTRELL: What I will say is that in certain --

QUESTION: You're saying that isn't happening anywhere in the world?

MR. VENTRELL: -- war zone and transitional economies, there are times where development works and other stuff is done in cash-predominant societies. But I'm not going to make some broad sweeping statement about a hypothetical.

QUESTION: It's not a hypothetical.

QUESTION: Have you not been in touch with the CIA? I mean, have you even asked – have you asked your colleagues over at CIA, there are these reports? I mean, President Karzai's admitted they're true, but have you actually gone to your colleagues in CIA and asked them to state what their policy is and what they've been doing over the last decade?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, I don't think we talk about our interagency discussions with our colleagues in the intelligence community or elsewhere in the Administration. Be happy to refer you to them if you want more information on their position.

QUESTION: Why did they – do you think that they continue the practice when they actually tried this in Iraq? I mean, we understand the urgency that sometimes you need to infuse some funds to deal with urgent conditions and so on, but it had disastrous consequences. So apparently, they are still using it in Afghanistan, not really learning a great deal from lessons learned.

MR. VENTRELL: Look, I'm not going to sort of do a broad historical analysis here. The bottom line is we do our development aid in the best way we can that is sustainable and is helpful to the local societies we're working with.

April 29, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Acting Deputy Spokesperson Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: What can you tell us about those wads of cash that have been handed over in suitcases and briefcases over the last 10 years to the Afghan Government?

MR. VENTRELL: I have nothing for you on that one way or another.

QUESTION: President Karzai actually confirmed today that that was the case, that some tens of millions of dollars have been handed over by the CIA over the last 10 years. I mean, this would – would this be a usual way of handing over tax dollar money?

MR. VENTRELL: I really have nothing for you one way or another.

QUESTION: Was there no State Department – there must be some State Department kind of cooperation or insistence, or at least the CIA would have asked for your advice on whether this was a good thing to do or not.

MR. VENTRELL: Jo, I really have nothing one way or another in terms of this – our Department has done extensive cooperation and development work over the years, but I have nothing for you on these specific claims one way or another.

QUESTION: This building has in the past talked about cash being transferred, has it not?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, in terms of supporting Afghan institutions or in other countries, have we provided direct cash assistance?

QUESTION: Yeah, either legally or – yeah, about the delivery of actual cash to Afghan officials, including President Karzai. I mean, one of your predecessors stood at the podium and said that, so I'm not sure I understand why --

MR. VENTRELL: I don't remember that --

QUESTION: Is it because this – is it because the CIA was supposedly involved that you're not going to talk about – you don't want to talk about it?

MR. VENTRELL: Despite remembering very much of what has happened at this podium, Matt, I'm not remembering this specific instance. But the bottom line is we provide our development assistance to Afghanistan, whether it's done in cash or in kind or otherwise --

QUESTION: No, I'm just trying to figure out, is there a reason that you're not wanting to talk about this is because it's the CIA that's involved and it's not you.

MR. VENTRELL: It doesn't involve the State Department.

QUESTION: Okay. But when it comes to the State Department development assistance or whatever kind of assistance the Department is, you're not denying that some of it was delivered in cash, are you?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, I can't sort of deny a negative over 11 years of cooperation assistance. I don't know in every form that it went, and we have a number of different ways to support institutions in developing societies. And Afghanistan is, indeed, one society that's had to rebuild from the ground up. So I'm not aware of all of our assistance programs over the many years.

QUESTION: Do you have anything on the stories that said that the same office – President Karzai's office received in the past bags of money from Iran, too?

MR. VENTRELL: I don't have anything for you on that one way or another. I'd refer you to the Afghans or the Iranians for more on that.

April 23, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Acting Deputy Spokesperson
Daily Press Briefing, selections on Pakistan/Afghanistan
Washington, DC

QUESTION: The Secretary is meeting with top officials from Pakistan and Afghanistan in the next 24 hours. What are the expectations for that meeting?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, this is just to confirm, as you've seen, that the U.S., Afghan, and Pakistan Governments have all spoken about our interest in a stable, secure Afghanistan, including progress on Afghan-led reconciliation. So to that end, Secretary Kerry has offered to host a meeting with Afghan and Pakistani officials on Wednesday, including President Karzai and Defense Minister Muhammadi, as well as General Kayani and Foreign Secretary Gilani for the Pakistani side.

So this is part of an ongoing trilateral dialog that has been underway since 2009, including the core group, which has met regularly at the Special Representative level and is focused on the specific topic of Afghan reconciliation. So I don't think we're going to preview the results of a meeting beforehand, but that's our – the general description of what the meeting will be tomorrow.

QUESTION: How realistic is it that talks between the Taliban, the Afghans, and the Americans will get going sooner rather than later?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, you heard going back to January when President Obama and President Karzai were together, our – that we reaffirmed the Afghan-led peace and reconciliation, that that's the surest way to end the violence and ensure lasting stability of Afghanistan. So we continue to support that. It's really about Afghans talking to Afghans about their future. But I don't have a specific timeline for you other than to say that the Taliban knows what it needs to do if we're going to get forward with this office opening in Doha and moving forward.

QUESTION: Was that January 2013 or January 2012?

MR. VENTRELL: That was this year, Brad.

QUESTION: Okay. But that was the same thing they said last year, right?

MR. VENTRELL: I'm referring specifically to the Oval Office meeting here a couple of months ago, this year.

QUESTION: Well, given the complexities of the alliances, both political and ethnic, in that region, is it realistic to assume that there could be some sort of peace accord reached between not just the U.S., the Taliban, and the Afghan Government, but also the Pakistani Government before U.S. troops leave at the end of 2014?

MR. VENTRELL: I'm not sure I'm going to look into the crystal ball and try to predict the potential for success here in terms of Afghan reconciliation, but --

QUESTION: Wouldn't that be desirable?

MR. VENTRELL: What we want is the Afghans talking to Afghans about their future to move toward a reconciliation that will end the violence.

QUESTION: What is the progress of the U.S. engaging with the Taliban? It seems that there may be some new olive branches being extended from the Taliban side. Do you have anything on that?

MR. VENTRELL: I don't have anything for you in terms of direct contact, directly between the U.S. and the Taliban.

QUESTION: Is that something that the U.S. would be willing to engage in?

MR. VENTRELL: I mean, this is something that they broke off many months ago, so I don't have anything for you, new, at this time. The core goal is to get the Afghans talking to the Afghans about their future. To the extent we can be supportive, we said that we would be. But I don't have anything specifically now.

QUESTION: Just a follow-up. In Afghanistan, there are eight Turkish nationals held captive since Sunday night.

MR. VENTRELL: Yeah.

QUESTION: Are you talking to Turkish officials and do you have any update from your --

MR. VENTRELL: I really refer you to ISAF on this. This has been something that ISAF has spoken to earlier. I don't have anything for you.

April 15, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Acting Deputy Spokesperson Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afghanistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: Today, the United Nations is saying that Afghanistan is going to have higher poppy cultivation this year. This does not bode well for Afghanistan and the region in the context of nexus between Taliban insurgency and poppy. Why – U.S. being there for more than a decade, what are the reason the international community has not been able to provide alternative to Afghan people?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, the U.S. Government is committed to working closely with the Afghan Government, regional partners, and the international community to reduce the flow of Afghan narcotics. Durable reductions in poppy cultivation derive from comprehensive efforts to lift rural incomes and provide licit alternatives. So the UN study was an early warning tool for the Afghan Government and international donors. And in light of this report, we're actively working with the Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics, provincial governors, and other donors to deploy resources, including crop eradication, crop reduction incentives, and public information campaigns.

So we're the largest donor of counternarcotics assistance to Afghanistan, and our work in this area will continue. But we are obviously looking at the results of this study.

QUESTION: But don't you think that in the run-up to 2014 drawdown this will strengthen Taliban, further reinforce their hold on the areas where poppy is cultivated?

MR. VENTRELL: Well, we've long been concerned that the Afghan narcotics trade, including the planting and harvesting of opium poppy crops, is a key source of funding to the Taliban. So that's been one of our deep concerns.

April 12, 2013

Patrick Ventrell, Acting Deputy Spokesperson Daily Press Briefing, selections on Afganistan Washington, DC

QUESTION: The spokesperson of Afghanistan's president today said that the Western countries are pressurizing Afghanistan to accept the bilateral agreement which the U.S. is pushing for without any conditions. What do you have to say? Is U.S. pressurizing Afghanistan or asking (inaudible) to push Afghanistan to accept those conditions?

MR. VENTRELL: Yeah, Lalit, I haven't seen those remarks, so I would continue to work on the bilateral security negotiations, and I just don't have an update. I mean, that's something that's part of an ongoing negotiation. But I just haven't seen those comments.

In the back.